



Towards A Framework For Virtual Internationalization

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Abstract: Internationalization and digitalization – how do these two higher education trends go together? Projects dealing with virtual mobility, collaborative online international learning (COIL), or virtual transnational education (TNE) have shown that the link between the international and the digital is not only a theoretical possibility but already a reality in many higher education institutions. There is a considerable amount of literature about Open and Distance Education and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) crossing national borders, and about supporting students in gaining intercultural competence and global awareness with the help of virtual media. Still, there remains a gap in the literature when it comes to conceptualizing a framework encompassing the manifold ways in which information and communications technology (ICT) can be used to internationalize higher education. In order to address this gap, this paper proposes an approach of drafting a framework for *virtual internationalization* in higher education, by focusing on its global, intercultural, and international dimensions.

Keywords: virtual internationalization, theoretical framework, higher education, digitalization, virtual mobility, collaborative online international learning (COIL), information and communications technology (ICT), transnational education, online distance education.

Résumé : Internationalisation et numérisation – comment ces deux tendances de l'enseignement supérieur s'associent-elles ? Les projets traitant de la mobilité virtuelle, de l'apprentissage international collaboratif en ligne, ou de l'éducation virtuelle transnationale ont montré que le lien entre l'international et le numérique n'est pas seulement une possibilité théorique, mais déjà une réalité dans bon nombre d'institutions d'enseignement supérieur. Il existe une vaste littérature, qui dépasse les barrières nationales, concernant la Formation Ouverte et A Distance (FOAD) et les Cours en Ligne Ouverts et Massifs (CLOM) aussi bien que le soutien apporté aux étudiants pour développer une compétence interculturelle et une conscience planétaire à l'aide des médias virtuels. Pour autant, une lacune demeure dans la littérature quant à la conceptualisation d'un cadre englobant les multiples manières de prendre en compte les Technologies de l'Information et de la Communication (TIC) pour internationaliser l'enseignement supérieur. Afin de combler cette lacune, cet article propose une approche permettant d'esquisser un cadre pour l'internationalisation virtuelle dans l'enseignement supérieur en se centrant sur ses dimensions mondiales, interculturelles et internationales.

Mots-clés : internationalisation virtuelle, cadre théorique, enseignement supérieur, numérisation, mobilité virtuelle, apprentissage international collaboratif en ligne, technologies de l'information et de la communication (TIC), éducation transnationale, formation à distance et en ligne.

Introduction

Digitalization, internationalization, and an expansion of flexible distance provision are among the trends that the higher education landscape is experiencing in many countries today. At the intersection of these trends, the traditional boundaries between distance and conventional education are becoming blurred (Guri-Rosenblit, 2014, p. 114; Naidu, 2003, p. 350), with distance and on-campus education both embracing online learning that can be accessed easily from anywhere on the planet. Virtual transnational education (TNE) and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) are prominent examples of higher education crossing national borders (Knight, 2016, p. 328). Furthermore, the aim to internationalize the curriculum is playing an increasing role in traditional and distance education



today. Institutions, instructional designers and instructors have stepped up efforts to internationalize the on-campus classroom, as well as distance education, with the help of information and communications technology (ICT). These efforts find their expression in, for example, attempts to introduce intercultural awareness into online course development (e.g., Gunawardena, 2014), as well as in virtual mobility and collaborative online international learning (COIL) projects in on-campus higher education (e.g., Guth, 2013).

In an endeavor to conceptualize the abundance of approaches aiming at internationalizing higher education via virtual media, this paper proposes to formulate a comprehensive framework for *virtual internationalization*. The basis will be a definition of its two component terms “virtual” and “internationalization” for the higher education context. On these grounds, I will explore the global, intercultural, and international dimensions of higher education internationalization in the virtual space. Finally, I will give a prognosis of the potential of the proposed concept for future research and practice.

Conceptualizing Virtual Internationalization

The internationalization of higher education has changed its nature in recent years. Gone are the days when the idea was practically synonymous with the physical mobility of students. The emergence of concepts focusing on the possibilities of *internationalization at home* or *of the curriculum* (Beelen & Jones, 2015) points to an increasing awareness that internationalization is not necessarily limited to university members *physically* crossing borders. Instead, certain curricular activities on campus or online have been developed to complement or substitute for physical mobility (de Wit & Hunter, 2016). In the course of such development, with the research fields of digitalization and distance education playing their part, virtual forms of internationalization have gained importance in on-campus and distance education alike.

Scholars have recently conceived concepts such as virtual mobility, globally networked learning, virtual exchange, telecollaboration, and collaborative online international learning (COIL), to name a few (Guth, 2013; UNICollaboration, 2014). These concepts are commonly used to label facets of internationalizing on-campus education at the classroom or program level, and have proven useful in advancing the idea of virtual forms of internationalization. However, they generally do not provide a comprehensive model of virtual internationalization that could be applied from the classroom to the national or sector level of both online and on-campus higher education. Yet, virtual internationalization expands the possibilities of internationalizing higher education in many ways – being more than virtual mobility only, just as internationalization is more than mobility only.

The term “virtual” has been defined, for the computer context, as “not physically present as such but made by software to appear to be so from the point of view of a program or user” and as “established or conducted using computer technology” (Virtual, 2013). Hence, reformulating Knight’s widely accepted definition of internationalization, the term “virtual internationalization” can be understood as follows:

Virtual internationalization at the national, sector, and institutional levels is defined as the process of introducing an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the delivery, purpose or functions of higher education with the help of information and communications technology (ICT). (My definition, based on Knight, 2003, p. 2, —modifications italicized.)

Thus, by simply including mention of information and communications technology (ICT) into Knight’s broad definition, the resulting definition of virtual internationalization is comprehensive

enough to cover all kinds of ICT supported measures and processes at different organizational levels, encompassing the delivery, purpose and functions of higher education. The foundations for this endeavor are laid down in this paper by approaching the required framework from the three dimensions mentioned in the definition: global, intercultural, and international.

The Global Dimension

The global dimension of internationalization is described by Knight (2004) as referring to “worldwide in scope and substance . . . [while] not highlight[ing] the concept of nation” (p. 8). The discussion of this aspect includes activities of higher education institutions that have a worldwide or part-worldwide (Marginson, 2011, p. 12) reach or clientele, as well as those that aim at introducing a global dimension into the *at-home* curriculum.

The phenomenon of *worldwide reach* is the first to be addressed in this paper. Marginson (2011) suggests speaking of the *glonacal* era of higher education, distinguishing three levels that influence and affect each other: *global*, *national*, and *local* (p. 13). The virtual delivery of programs, in his view, can contribute to the global dimension of higher education, especially because of the potential to take “higher education straight from the local to the global dimension” (p. 22), bypassing the national level. Of course, the adoption of necessary national and international frameworks and agreements (such as the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS)) is a prerequisite for such worldwide reach to rise to its full potential (Marginson & van der Wende, 2007).

Higher education institutions and consortia, as well as private providers have discovered globally available higher education as a growth market, and have started offering online degrees and certificates worldwide. MOOCs and MOOC providers such as Coursera, Udacity, and Miriada X are further examples working at the global scale. In fact, having been unknown to most only a few years ago, MOOCs are now being considered and applied by many institutions around the world as a valid internationalization instrument (Knight, 2014, p. 49). These examples demonstrate that distance education providers have the potential to transcend national borders, enrolling massive numbers of students from almost any location worldwide (Gunawardena, 2014, p. 75; Guri-Rosenblit, 2014, p. 119). However, Amirault and Visser (2010, pp. 23-24) show that virtual program offerings do not *automatically* cross borders, nor result in the same effects everywhere. Virtual universities have not always been successful – the most important reasons are presumed to lie in the incapacity to appeal to the global target groups, in quality and intercultural issues, and in political factors (Marginson & van der Wende, 2007, p. 10 and 42).

What is more, in spite of their theoretical potential for worldwide reach, many online distance programs are targeted at a domestic market (Sadykova, 2012, p. 2), and the ratio of students enrolled in these courses while living abroad is low in many countries. In the United States in 2014, for example, just over 1.3 % of students taking exclusively distance education courses offered from the United States resided abroad (Snyder, de Brey, & Dillow, 2016). Of course, there are students from everywhere in the world who live *within* a certain country that need to be taken into consideration. One distinctive example is Kiron based in Germany, which, in collaboration with traditional higher education institutions and their on-campus programs, offers online higher education for refugees, thus opening up German higher education to a global clientele who live within the country.

In any case, be it in- or out-of-country provision, be it online distance or on-campus education, the next step is to follow Amirault and Visser (2010) in asking: “The question . . . is not just *Do we have international participants?*, but rather, *Do we have internationalized learning environments?*” (p. 28,

emphasis in original). This leads to the second aspect in this section, namely introducing a *global* component to the *at-home* curriculum. Rephrasing the quote by Amirault and Visser, one could ask: In what ways can ICT help to introduce a global dimension into all kinds of programs in higher education? Is it not so that many institutional mission statements and national higher education internationalization strategies aim to prepare students to live in a *globalized world* in which they are being challenged to become *global citizens* and, through *global engagement*, foster *global understanding*, thereby contributing to the *global knowledge society* as inhabitants of the *global village* (cf. Teichler, 2004, p. 23)? Indeed, scholars have identified a shift towards an “approach to internationalisation that sees the principal outcome of international education as educating graduates able to live and work in a global society” (de Wit & Hunter, 2015, p. 51). Internationalization, in this sense, does not mean only the enrollment of students from anywhere in the world (either domestically or via forms of globally available education); it includes the aspect of introducing a *global* component into the *at-home* curriculum in on-campus and online distance education alike.

The Intercultural Dimension

Regarding the intercultural dimension of virtual internationalization, two aspects will again be addressed in this paper: The first is the attempt to provide an interculturally adequate classroom to facilitate the same quality of learning for all students, however interculturally diverse they may be (Edmundson, 2009), thereby reaching out to an interculturally diverse clientele. The second aspect is the attempt to foster intercultural competence of participants via the curriculum.

Investigating questions that revolve around interculturally sensitive online classrooms, scholars have examined culture and intercultural learning in virtual environments in different ways. One approach is to ask about learners’ and instructors’ diversity and *cultural differences*, which are generally perceived as essential to their nationality, ethnicity, or other significant cultural characteristic. Often influenced by the works of authors such as Geert Hofstede or Edward T. Hall, insightful results on learners from different cultural backgrounds have been obtained by, for example, M. Wang (2007) and Mishra (2011). Another approach is to focus on *cultural resemblances*, perceiving an increasing portion of learners in the online classroom as *digital natives*, members of a *global cyberculture*, etc. Palfrey, in an e-mail to his colleague Gasser, envisions an emerging global culture with the information network of the Internet at the source of an intensification of cross-cultural exchanges, the benefits of which by far exceed those of student exchange programs (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008, pp. 274-275). A third approach is to understand culture in the online classroom as being constructed (or negotiated) (Gunawardena, 2014, p. 83), in other words, as a *third culture* (Raybourn, Kings, & Davies, 2003, p. 106). This perspective follows the assumption that learners and instructors bring their experiences, their types of socialization, and their culturally formed learning and teaching styles into the online classroom, parts of which the others may share, and parts of which they do not. In the virtual space, then, there is the potential – not the automatism – that a *new cultural amalgam* (Ess, 2009, p. 18) can be created among participants.

It has been argued that an equalizing cyberculture does not emerge naturally in online education, but that instead, it is necessary to provide a culturally sensitive classroom (Gunawardena, 2014; O’Mahony, 2014; Schachtner, 2010, p. 70). Yet, the solution cannot reside in “duplicat[ing] the learning environment from the learners’ home culture. Rather, the purpose is to build mutual accommodation and respect for the culture of others in order to reach academic success” (C.-M. Wang & Reeves, 2007, p. 10). This may prove necessary, especially because differences encountered in the online classroom may be less obvious than in face-to-face classrooms, and because they are not limited to evident ones

such as language. They can also be hidden in culturally influenced learning styles, values, or even religious influences (Edmundson, 2009). As this is obviously no easy task, it has been suggested that development programs for faculty and support personnel should be provided (Boubsil & Carabajal, 2011, p. 12).

The second aspect of the intercultural dimension to be discussed in this section is the fostering of learners' *intercultural competence*. This term can be understood to be:

The appropriate and effective management of interaction between people who, to some degree or another, represent different or divergent affective, cognitive, and behavioral orientations to the world. . . . The extent to which individuals *manifest* aspects of, or are influenced by, their group or cultural affiliations and characteristics is what makes an interaction an *intercultural* process. (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009, p. 7, emphasis in original)

Intercultural competence, in this sense, is required of people interacting with others who manifest features of a culture that differs from their own.^a In the virtual space, there is reason to believe that establishing this kind of competence requires approaches that are different from those that can be applied in physical encounters. This is particularly true when communicating via asynchronous textual tools, because visual cues and immediate feedback are lacking (Sadykova, 2012, p. 41). On the other hand, scholars have also valued the potential of bringing intercultural learning into online education because of the possibility to draw benefit from the multicultural composition of many (if not all) online classes (Ess, 2009, p. 25). As Knight (2004) puts it: "We know that internationalization is also about relating to the diversity that exists within countries, communities, and institutions" (p. 11).

The International Dimension

Again, two aspects of the topic under discussion are presented in this section. The first deals with the international reach (or clientele) of higher education, and the second with international curricula. In contrast to the *global* dimension, which describes phenomena and processes transgressing the national level without highlighting the concept of nation, the *international* dimension is characterized by the limited number of countries that may be involved.

The aspect I will discuss in the context of international reach is transnational education (TNE) and specifically, virtual TNE. TNE has been defined as "award- or credit-bearing learning undertaken by students who are based in a different country from that of the awarding institution" (O'Mahony, 2014, p. 8). In this sense, virtual TNE refers to those cross-border programs that are delivered via distance provision. In practice, many TNE programs today offer a mixed delivery mode of blending distance learning with on-campus elements – for example, through support structures or twinning models (Ziguras, 2008, p. 644). Virtual TNE is a growing market: "Rapid advances in the Internet, multimedia, and e-learning technologies provide increasing support for the adoption or expansion of distance learning technologies as a delivery method for transnational education" (Boubsil & Carabajal, 2011, p. 6). It is therefore estimated that the demand for international higher education will continue to grow, and that the online, distance delivery of TNE will play an increasing role in the future (de Wit & Hunter, 2015, p. 49; Knight, 2016, p. 334).

Coming to the second aspect of this section – international curricula – I will focus on the idea of virtual mobility. Of course, there are other facets that this aspect may encompass, including (but not limited to) virtually assisted foreign language or area studies (de Wit & Hunter, 2015, p. 42; cf. also Leask, 2015). Exemplarily, this section concentrates on the 'buzzword' virtual mobility, which requires special attention in order not to be confused with virtual internationalization as a whole. The term can

be understood as a physical international experience being complemented or substituted by a virtual component (Leask, 2015, p. 19).⁸ While with virtual TNE, a whole program moves abroad, virtual mobility can be applied to essentially any curriculum, be it online distance education or on-campus delivery.

Collaborative online international learning (COIL), developed at the State University of New York, is an especially successful model of virtual mobility. Bringing classes from two (sometimes more) countries together online, the COIL method “promotes interactive shared coursework, emphasizing experimental learning and gives collaborating students a chance to get to know each other while developing meaningful projects together” (Guth, 2013, p. 2). While some argue that COIL is the more accurate term than virtual mobility (de Wit, 2013), it proves advisable not to dismiss the former altogether: The term “virtual mobility” opens up the possibility to include international virtual experiences that are not necessarily grounded in collaboration, but provide other forms of virtual travel⁹, including *virtual field trips* (cf., e.g., <http://www.georama.com/berkeley-college/>), and *virtual internships* (Vriens & van Petegem, 2011). In fact, many scholars see virtual mobility as “one of the most flexible, versatile and inclusive approaches in the provision of international experience opportunities” (Villar-Onrubia & Rajpal, 2016, p. 75; cf. also MOVINTER, 2010). And the founder of the German MOOC provider Iversity envisions virtual student exchanges modeled on the European program ERASMUS – an “online ERASMUS for all” (Klöpper, 2014).

Conclusion: Towards a Framework For Virtual Internationalization

In this paper, I have investigated three dimensions of virtual internationalization: global, intercultural, and international. Each time, two perspectives have been taken: The first concerns the involvement of a global, intercultural, or international *clientele* or *reach*. The second considers a global, intercultural, or international *curriculum*.

The considerations of this paper have shown that the concept of virtual internationalization has potential in all three dimensions and in both perspectives, going far beyond the ‘buzzword’ of virtual mobility. Virtual TNE, virtual intercultural trainings and language courses, virtual internships and field trips, COIL, etc. – approaches as diverse as these have one thing in common: They all make use of ICT to internationalize higher education. A comprehensive framework for virtual internationalization can help us better assess the possibilities of intersecting internationalization efforts and ICT, and maybe discover blind spots with promising potentials.

As digitalization, internationalization, and an expansion of flexible distance provision continue to be powerful trends, it will be worthwhile further investigating the manifestations and potentials of virtual internationalization in higher education. This paper has provided a stepping stone for this endeavor.

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Notes

ⁱ The part-world aspect may, for example, refer to developing countries in which higher education institutions of the “developed world” pursue some kind of “global engagement” (Marginson & van der Wende, 2007, p. 20).

ⁱⁱ Some have argued that any intergroup interaction has this affordance, since intercultural differences are related not only to nationality, but also to characteristics such as ethnicity, religion, or region (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009, p. 7).

ⁱⁱⁱ An insightful early conceptualization of virtual mobility in the higher education context has been provided by van der Wende (2002).

^{iv} For a more profound discussion of different forms of virtual mobilities, see Urry (2007).